

WASHINGTON - Congressman Steny Hoyer (D-MD) and Congressman Curt Weldon (R-PA), Co-Chairs of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus last night successfully added an amendment to the 2005 Homeland Security Appropriations bill to provide \$50 million in funding for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Firefighters (SAFER) Program. Congressman Hoyer is a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee.

Funding for this historic new federal grant program was included in the Homeland Security Appropriations bill at the request of Congressman Hoyer and will help career and volunteer fire departments hire new firefighters, recruit and retain volunteer fire fighters, and provide relief to the thousands of local fire stations across the country that are currently operating short of staff. Two-thirds of all professional and volunteer fire departments do not have sufficient personnel to adequately protect the public.

"This additional funding seeks to make a modest down payment on completely fulfilling our obligation to ensure that our firefighters here in Maryland and across the country have at their disposal every resource possible to not only guarantee their own safety, but also to allow them to better serve our families and neighborhoods," said Hoyer.

"During the last four years, Congress has provided nearly \$2 billion for the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program." Hoyer continued. "These funds have been used by large and small departments to purchase basic firefighting equipment ranging from infrared cameras and defibrillators to HAZmat detection devices, new vehicles and to implement improved training and fitness programs.

"Already over \$16 million in grant funds have been allocated to local fire departments in Maryland, which have helped them purchase the equipment and provide the training they need to better protect the citizens of our state.

"But inadequate training and outdated equipment are not the only challenges facing our fire departments today. Insufficient staffing is a very real problem for far too many of the nation's career and volunteer fire departments. In fact, the National Fire Protection Association estimates that between 75,000 and 85,000 new firefighters are needed in order to bring all fire departments to this minimum staffing requirement.

"To address this problem, Congress last year approved the creation of the SAFER program to help fire departments hire new firefighters and recruit and retain volunteers. Modeled after the highly successful Assistance to Firefighters Program, the SAFER grants will be awarded directly to career and volunteer fire departments.

"I am pleased that the House of Representatives recognized the importance of supporting our first responders by adding my amendment to the Homeland Security Appropriations bill to begin implementation of the SAFER program. This is a positive first step toward bringing our fire departments to staffing levels that will improve the safety of our firefighters and allow them to better serve our communities."

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